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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001665

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PHSA](#) [EWWT](#) [MOPS](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ABKHAZIA STEPS UP RHETORIC ON BLACK SEA
SHIPPING

REF: A. TBILISI 1643
[1](#)B. TBILISI 1627
[1](#)C. TBILISI 1587

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment. On September 2 Abkhaz de facto "president" Bagapsh ordered his naval forces to attack any Georgian vessel entering what he considers Abkhaz territorial waters. Following Georgian seizures of ships traveling to Abkhazia for violations of Georgian law and Russian promises to escort such vessels, Bagapsh's step heightens the tension by introducing for the first time an explicit threat of military force. The threat is largely empty: the de facto authorities likely do not have the capacity to carry it out, and the Georgians have not been entering the waters off Abkhazia anyway. Many believe Bagapsh is posing for domestic political consumption in the runup to December "presidential" elections. Also, the Georgians have taken steps to try to prevent ships from embarking on trips to Abkhazia -- thereby preventing confrontations. Nevertheless, the Georgians have indicated they intend to continue enforcing their laws, and Bagapsh's position increases the stakes for any such actions. A September 3 Russian MFA statement warning that Georgian actions could result in "serious armed incidents" is keeping the war of words going. End summary and comment.

BAGAPSH RAISES THE STAKES

[1](#)2. (SBU) On September 2 the "presidential" website announced that Bagapsh had ordered Abkhaz naval forces "to open fire and destroy Georgian ships involved in piratical actions in Abkhaz territorial waters." The step followed less specific threats leveled by Bagapsh and "foreign minister" Sergey Shamba to take proportional measures in response to Georgian actions (refs B,C). Bagapsh seemed to suggest that only Abkhaz, and not Russian, forces would carry out the order, but he left the door open to Russian involvement: "I emphasize that the order is given to the Abkhaz Navy, and as far as Russian forces in the region are concerned, they act in the framework of an existing intergovernmental agreement."

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Georgian press quoted experts as saying that Abkhaz naval forces do not have the capacity to carry out such a threat. They speculated that Russia must therefore have either instructed Bagapsh to take the step or agreed to back it up militarily. Georgian Reintegration Minister Temuri Yakobashvili downplayed the significance of the order, however, saying publicly that Bagapsh was posing for the sake of his voters. A September 3 statement released by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not directly address the issue of possible Russian involvement, but it warns that Georgia's actions against shipping are "fraught with aggravation of the military-political situation in the region and can lead to serious armed incidents. . . . All

responsibility for possible unforeseen consequences in this regard lie completely on the Georgian side." On August 28, Deputy Head of the Russian Border Guards Yevgeniy Inchin was quoted in Georgian press as saying that his service's boats would escort vessels headed to Abkhazia.

14. (C) Local European diplomats have expressed concern over the heightened rhetoric and the possibility of another ship detention by Georgia resulting in a military incident. On September 2, the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) released a statement calling on the Georgian, Russian and Abkhaz de facto sides "to refrain from words and actions that could cause an increase in tension and a deterioration of the situation." The EUMM has included the issue of seizures of and attacks on vessels on the agenda for the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism for Abkhazia, scheduled to meet September 8.

A SERIOUS THREAT?

15. (C) By itself, Bagapsh's move seems unlikely to increase the likelihood of an actual confrontation. The Abkhaz have extremely limited naval resources, so it is unclear they could carry out the order even if they wanted to. Also, Georgian vessels have not been entering what Bagapsh would call his territorial waters; Georgian Coast Guard officials have explained to post they wait until after the vessels depart the territorial and contiguous zones off the coast of Abkhazia before engaging, in order to avoid provocations (ref C). Although Bagapsh has made other, vaguer threats against Georgian actions in general, the order is specifically

TBILISI 00001665 002 OF 002

targeted at Georgian vessels inside that zone. The tone of the order is in keeping with a general toughening of Bagapsh's rhetoric in recent months, which virtually all observers attribute to the approaching elections, so Yakobashvili is likely correct in his reading of the move as essentially oriented at a local audience.

16. (C) Georgia has taken steps to prevent confrontations in the first place. Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze told the Ambassador that he has instructed Georgian embassies to ask countries to discourage their flagged vessels from undertaking trips to Abkhazia, and he also said Georgia would not confront any vessel escorted by a Russian ship (ref A). General Zaza Gogava, head of the Border Police, which includes the Coast Guard, has said that initiating an armed confrontation with a Russian vessel would be foolish. Nevertheless, Coast Guard contacts told emboff they intended to continue confronting vessels they believed were violating Georgian law, and the possibility of a confrontation therefore remains. One observer speculated that Russia would deliberately send a vessel with a Russian crew and/or Russian forces to be ready to respond with force to any Georgian attempt at interception.

COMMENT: A MINOR THREAT -- BUT A REAL ONE

17. (C) Although the Georgians have insisted on their right to detain ships and their intention to continue doing so, the risk of an actual confrontation between Georgian and either Russian or Abkhaz forces seems low. The Georgians have not been entering the waters off Abkhazia. They have stated they will not confront a vessel escorted by a Russian vessel, because they understand the consequences of such action. They have been intercepting only ships with a history of traveling to Abkhazia -- so even in the unlikely event that a vessel were planted with Russian forces, it would probably not be a priority target for Georgia. Nevertheless, any hostile confrontation carries certain risks, and Bagapsh's order puts such confrontations in a more militarized context. Even if he aimed his statements primarily at a domestic audience, Bagapsh may at some point feel the need to back up his words with action, especially if the election looks

close. The EUMM was wise to include the topic in the IPRM agenda, because preventing an incident is indeed better than responding to one. It is likely the topic will come up in Geneva at the September 17 meeting as well.

TEFFT